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SECTION SEVEN

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### Mr. Sinclair Lewis as a Polemicist

BABBITT. By Sinclair Lewis. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

MR. SINCLAIR LEWIS'S present novel, "Babbitt" is in the difficult position of a successor to his remarkably popular "Main Street," and has to face an audience largely prepared to believe that authors never repeat their triumphs. Nothing delights more the sensation fed American public after raising up a new celebrity to the stars than to reduce him to the ranks. Both Mr. Hutchinson and Mr. Lewis face this human prejudice of democracies with their season's offerings. Mr. Sinclair Lewis at least, with his keen understanding of popular processes of thinking, has not sought to evade the issue. "Babbitt" is a distinct challenge alike to the friends and the critics of his famous novel. Quaintly the intention is too apparent, but it has the merit of audacity, imagination and that vital confidence in oneself which protects a certain author even against his friends.

It has become popular in certain caustic circles to say the success of "Main Street" was made by those who could never finish it, and in this criticism there must be some pertinacity, for it has not only become current here but returns to us from English sources. It is a criticism which Mr. Lewis, if he adheres to his present literary methods, will have to face continuously. Others have said that the popularity of the book lay in its extremely felicitous title and have asserted that once the proposition stated the rest was immaterial. All these criticisms can be urged against the city method of Mr. Lewis in the present book without, however, detracting from the significance of Mr. Lewis in present day fiction.

You may discuss whether Mr. Lewis is a true novelist or not, whether he is a sociologist rather than an artist, whether his depiction of "Main Street," and the larger macadamized Main Street of "Babbitt," is true to life or a distortion; the fact will remain that Mr. Lewis is revolutionizingly significant. In his later development, added to his realistic genius for detailed observation, trenchant phrase and felicitous description (part of the baggage of an artist, surely), he may develop a vision for seeing from the bottom up, as well as from the top down, and a more sympathetic perception of the humble qualities of romance; which is, simply stated, that the lights and shadows of life are relative and that the compensations of love, ambition, sacrifice and hope are just as active, precious and real under the cloak of vulgarity as where refinement, opportunity and education fashion a society. The secret of the success of Dickens was not in the pencil of the caricaturist but in his power to draw out of the masses characters that were often lovable and always sympathetically understandable.

Yet, if Mr. Lewis does remain in his present literary method, he will at least have profoundly affected not only the coming generation of novelists but, a more notable achievement, have educated the great reading public to a willingness toward self examination, a receptive mood, which induces a genuine literature. Many a novel of fearless insight into American life will succeed because Mr. Lewis has shocked his public with the brusqueries of "Main Street" and "Babbitt." When we remember the treacle hungry public of only ten years ago and its sacrosanct tenets of smug respectability that were the despair of the writer, I, for one, acknowledge gratefully my debt to the riotous audacity of Mr. Lewis.

#### II.

Considered as a novel "Babbitt" is extremely vulnerable. But first consider it not as a work of fiction but as an arraignment of a society, which Mr. Lewis certainly has in mind and possibly holds of major importance. For after all the novel is valuable as a literary form, chiefly be-

cause it may be said to have no canonized form and is plastic material that each arriving literary architect can mold to his own requirements, undaunted by traditions. Wells's "Marriage," to cite but one case, is distinctly a tract. Promptly then "Babbitt" should be considered as a polemic.

A Review by OWEN JOHNSON.

title Main Street has become universally applicable, has now proceeded to a bigger canvas and applied his undoubted talents of analytical criticism to booster business as in a booster town of 360,000 inhabitants located somewhere near Chicago. Babbitt is a real estate operator, product of a State



Sinclair Lewis.

Mr. Lewis, then, having accomplished the notable feat of forcing a smug America to consider its superficial vanities and ingrained narrowness in a novel that was so significant of all American life that the

university; prospering at forty; married to a woman who became his wife as a sort of sentimental accident; living a home life of unrelieved vulgarity; vulgarian himself, and the friend of business types

of boosters who are represented as narrow, vulgar, covetous, explosive, ostentatious and cheaply imitation of standards they merely covet. But Babbitt, though evidently drawn to represent that tyrant of democracy, the average citizen his point of view, his methods of self-deception, self-glorification and self-sufficiency is, after all, only a convenient window through which to spy out the real hero of the book, which is the city of Zenith itself.

Mr. Sinclair Lewis proceeds to arraign the city of Zenith (supply whatever name occurs to you) with an accumulating array of detailed criticism worthy of a Pinkerton agency and in a manner that suggests the opening of a new era of literary muckraking. He arraigns it trenchantly, imaginatively, vindictively, without compromise or palliation. Business is its god and the booster its prophet. Its successful business men traffic with their consciences in open or covert alliance with the forces of political evil that lurk in the shadows. When a socialist upheaval threatens to reform the city the forces of good government (i. e., the forces of cant and of hypocrisy) marshal to save the city for themselves under the tutelage of a corrupt and corrupting boss. The church as an institution is depicted in the Christian Presbyterian Church, intent on swelling the membership of its Sunday school by booster methods inspired by a pastor, Dr. Drew, a hustling archbooster, keen for every scrap of publicity that can add to his self-advertisement; shutting his eyes in willing self-deception to the character of his associates; voicing the spiritual indignation of a business community against the moral parasites and leeches that threaten society in the guise of progressives or radicals. Politics as an institution is the usual corrupt alliance between Orfutt, the boss, and profiting business interests; open in this case—insidious in the stultifying use of the red flag of radicalism to keep the average citizen within a sheeplike discipline. Finance and society (the higher society) as institutions are arranged in the persons of hypocrites, crooks and snobs. Religious revivals are caricatured in the person of Mike Munday, where vulgarity is heaped on blasphemy.

Attempts at culture are arraigned in the person of one Chum Fink, a thinly veiled caricature, who supplies a daily column of verse printed in prose and goes into ecstasies over the literary brilliance of certain advertising bunk. Attempts at Bohemianism are arraigned, home life, wives, children, the higher culture, boosters' conventions, interior decoration, outward display, social aspirations—all are thrown together in a mad, whirling, three ringed, great American circus, without fear or favor. Whatever else may be said of Mr. Lewis, cowardice and compromise play no part in his makeup.

#### III.

This process of arraignment never ceases to pile up, overwhelming the story, dwarfing the character, preempting the attention. In this onslaught, which Dean Swift himself never exceeded in ferocity, Mr. Lewis has written descriptions that are a literary delight, mordant, inspired, felicitous and often illuminated with passages of genuine poetry. To my mind it is a performance exceeding anything he accomplished in "Main Street." The trouble with this arraignment of a society is that it is all separately true and collectively false. No one can deny that it is true of the life he depicts and characteristically true, that many (let us even admit the majority) of its citizens are sunk in the middle ages of mental, moral and aesthetic hypocrisy; that many of its financiers are crooks; its religious leaders, blatant, narrow minded, self seeking; pulpit thumpers; that, too, many homes are clothed in vulgarity, rent with bickerings, husband and wife yoked together in a hateful alliance

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page		Page
Sinclair Lewis as a Polemicist.		The Tremendous Event—	
A Review by Owen Johnson.....	1	Dust of the Desert—Wanted,	
Old World England.....	2	a Wife—A Modern Trio in	
An Old World Spanish Venturer		an Old Town—The Trail of	
On Buying a Hat. By Clair		the White Mule—The Hawk	
Price .....	3	of Egypt—Four-Square—The	
From the Thames to Montclair.		A m a z i n g Inheritance—	
By Edward W. Townsend.....	4	M'Lord of the White Road—	
Some Women Writers of the		The Captive Herd—Tutor's	
Hour. Portraits.....	5	Lane—The Blood Ship—The	
The Futurity of 1843. By Mar-		Mountain School Teacher—	
tha McCulloch Williams.....	6	The Golden Face—Lonesome	
Sophie Travels First Cabin.		Town .....	10
By Emily Z. Friedkin.....	7	In Polite Language. By Mau-	
What You Should Know About		rice Morris.....	11
American Authors. XII. Jose-		Chronicle and Comment. By	
ph Hergesheimer.....	8	Arthur Bartlett Maurice.....	12
Woman's Place in the Bank. By		The World of Letters as Others	
Eleanor Booth Simmons.....	9	See It.....	13
New Fiction in Varied Forms:		Conscience Money. By Frank	
Her Unwelcome Husband—		Curtis .....	14
Charles Rex—Babel—The		The World of Foreign Books.	
Judge—Beyond Rope and		German Books. Surveyed by	
Fence—Witch Doctors—A		Ludwig Lewisohn.....	15
Market Bundle—Picking		A Doughboy Returns to France.	
Winners With Major Miles—		By Corliss Hooven Griffis....	17
		Books Received.....	21

Continued on Following Page